DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 809 FL 018 904

AUTHOR Pacesova, Jaroslava
TITLE Innovations in the Child's Lexicon.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of Applied Linguistics, sponsored by International Association of Applied Linguistics (9th, Thessaloniki, Greece, April 15-21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Patterns; *Child Language; *Czech; Foreign Countries; *Language Acquisition; *Semantics; Uncommonly Taught Languages; *Vocabulary Development; Young Children

ABSTRACT

In learning a language as a means of communication, children must first coin new word-forms to express meanings for words they do not yet know. Children learn at an early age that lexicon can be used creatively, and that creativity is not simply a matter of learning which word-paradigms are available in the language, but also learning adult conventions on the uses of word-forms that carry these meanings. In an analysis of innovations in children learning Czech as their first language, both the meanings of lexical innovations and the forms used to convey these innovations are considered. One focal point is the child's behavior in a situation when a new reality must be labeled. The following approaches seem to be the most common: (1) the child coins a completely novel naming unit that has no connection with those existing in adult language; (2) the child replaces the yet unknown naming unit by one already familiar; (3) the child provides the already mastered naming unit with a new meaning; (4) the child resorts to various modifications of already existing naming units. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Pacesova
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED323809

JAROSLAVA PAČESOVÁ

INNOVATIONS IN THE CHILD´S LEXICON

Children - in mastering a language as the means of communication - have to coin new word-forms to express meanings for which they have not yet ready-made words. They learn, at an early age, from as young as two onwards, that lexicon can be used creatively and that creativity is not simply a matter of learning which word-formational paradigms are available in the language, but also a matter of learning the adult conventions on uses of the word-forms that carry these meanings. In our paper we consider both the meanings of lexical innovations and the forms used to convey them in children mastering Czech as their first language.

One of the most important question to be answered in connection with the formal aspects of the word is to show the child´s behaviour in the situation when a new reality which has not yet been the center of his attention has to be labelled. The following approaches seem to be the most common:

1. the child coins a completely novel naming unit which has no connection with those existing in adult language;
2. he replaces the as yet unknown naming unit by one already familiar;
3. he provides the already mastered naming unit with new meaning;
4. he resorts to various modifications of already existing naming units.

The first of the possible approaches is comparatively rare. Innovations here are the corollary of existing lexical gaps when the child either

- has no word form that is conventionally used to express the particular meaning and creates a novel naming unit, such as "ňuňu" in reference to "dudlík" (=dummy), "lolo" in reference to "chleba" (=bread), "meňeňe" in reference to "med" (=honey), or

FL018904

- has difficulties in retrieving the right word form from memory and therefore creates a novel naming unit, the form of which is based on the hypostasis of the most outstanding feature in the object to be named; hence the innovations such as "nohák" (=long-legger) i.e. a long-legged bird in lieu of "čáp" (=stork), "píchák" (=pricker) i.e. an animal whose spines prick in lieu of "ježek" (=hedgehog) etc.

Such innovations vary from child to child and most of them are nonce uses, that is coinages that are interpretable on the occasion of their use but fail to retain a permanent place in the lexicon.

The second approach, namely the as yet non-mastered naming unit is replaced by one already familiar to the child, is applied in the situation when he is faced to label a new object whose name, because of its specialized character, offers no motivation. The paronymic attraction is here the most plausible explanation for the child's choice of an innovative form. On the basis of various associations - acoustic in most cases - the child uses a phonemic shape that is similar to that wanted for the novel naming unit. Thus "cibula" (=onion) is used in reference to "cirkula" (=circular saw), "lednica" (=refrigerator) in reference to "polednice" (=nightmare), "výstaviště" (=exhibition ground) in reference to "přístaviště" (=port) etc.

An interesting adaptation of the existing material is met with when the child creates the novel name by way of contamination, i.e. by blending two words that imply those characteristic features which are to be found in the novel unit. Such are, for example, "brnkara" in lieu of "kytara" representing the contamination of the verb "brnkat" (=to twang) + "kytara", i.e. a general term denotating the guitar; "letáček" in lieu of "ptáček" repre-

senting the contamination of the verb "letět" (=to fly) + a general term denotating the bird; "metrák" in lieu of "metro" where two substantives, namely "metro" (=underground) + "vlak" (=train) are blended. Formation of this kind are, as a rule, the child´s personal idiosyncracy and disappear as quickly as they appear.

The third approach, namely the extension of the existing word to serve new needs is, on the other hand, a common strategy that children follow in their effort to communicate while their vocabulary is as yet considerably limited.

At early stages, overextensions concern mostly the interjections. Thus, e.g. "hú", the original indication of which was the vacuum cleaner is gradually extended to labelling any noisemaking apparatus such as hairdrier, mixer, drilling or mowing machine, or "bow-wow" to label any mammal, alive or in picture. Heuristic function of overextension appears, as soon as the child uses "bow-wow", e.g. in reference to a fur coat. He evidently fails to identify the intended adult referent for the word and matches the word with separate visual schemes that are based on his overall experience with this word in repeated situation contexts. Overextension here is the consequence of both the poverty of the vocabulary and the child´s readiness to recall at least one attribute common to the known and to the as yet unknown reality.

At more mature stages, overextensions occur mostly in nouns and are as a rule based on the appearance of the referent object, the resemblance in shape, size, colour or texture. Thus "ball" is used in reference to any spherical object, "dog" in reference to any four-legged mammal, "elephant" in reference to any big animal. The feature of colour perhaps in combination with texture is then responsible for the use of "snow" in reference to snowdrift, foam in the bath, head in a glass of beer, whipped cream

in a dish and white clouds in the sky. The dominance of the feature may, however, vary: the moon is referred to as "a roll" or as "a ball" according to its momentary shape; the horse in a picture book is referred to as "a horse" unlike the real horse which the child happens to see in the village and for which, evidently because of what seems to him its enormous size, he picks out the term "elephant". This suggests that overextension may offer indirect clues to the conceptual representations children have of certain categories. They seem to judge on the basis of similarities with neighbouring categories whether a word can be extended to pick out that further kind of referent as well. The ability to make similarity judgements then appears crucial not only for the formation of conceptual categories and other cognitive representations but also for decisions about word use.

The opposite phenomenon, namely underextensions also appear in Czech children. Our ability to detect them is, nevertheless, more limited than our ability to notice overextensions. Unless the child himself comments on the semantic situation, we hardly know about the relation he has concerning the meaning and the word used to express it. The following example shows how the child´s reaction on the newly experienced reality can be surprising. In the bath, a three-year-old boy by chance touches his rib and asks: "What is this"? Getting the answer that it is a bone, he is shocked and cries out unhappily: "Have I eaten it"? The recollection of the situation in which when having fish for lunch mother said "Be careful of the bones" is clear. His questions, however, offer several pieces of information. First, the underextension of the word bones to something not eatable, related to food; second, his ignorance of the fact that he has bones too; and third, his belief that if he has a bone in his body, he must

have eaten it as this is for him the only possible explanation of its getting there.

Overlaps then bring evidence that the child´s meanings are broader and the bounderies between them are much less definite as compared to adult meanings. Let us illustrate this fact: as long as the child only uses words in the contexts in which he acquired them, his language appears adultlike, for example "It is raining", "I am a big boy" etc. Deviations occur when the child´s use of a word overlaps with two or more adult words. For instance, a child who thinks "rain" picks out falling water has a meaning for rain that overlaps with the adult "rain" and "shower", the result of which are his constructions such as "Mummy is raining in the bathroom" or "I shan´t have a cold rain today". Instances such as "The string is not big enough", "the hill is big", "my grandpa died, he was already very big" illustrate that the child picks out the word "big" - besides its correct uses, also to express length, height and high age, in other words, his meaning for "big" overlaps with adult "big", "long", "high" and "old".

Full semantic mismatches then are those cases where the child´s and adult´s meanings have nothing in common. At early stages, we are often faced with situations where the child violates, for example the designation of place, time or manner when using adverbs "upwards" in lieu of "downwards", "tomorrow" in lieu of "yesterday", "quickly" in lieu of "slowly" etc. At later stages, mismatches concern foremost foreign or abstract words. Like underextensions, mismatches too are hard to detect. Unless the child is willing to answer our question or comment on the semantic situation, we may never discover what he thinks of it. Here is at least one example. Watching the video fairy-tale "The phlegmatic elephant" several times, a three-year-old boy made no comment.

Once, however, he said: "Look, now the baby elephant will be phlegmatic" - at the moment when, in a circus show, it started flying down the tower using its long ears as wings. The most outstanding attribute of the hero, that is its ability to fly, has determined the meaning of the unknown term. Compared to the reality, the child mismatched not only the meaning of the word in question but also the object which was qualified by it: it was not the baby elephant that was phlegmatic but his mother, because her baby had been taken away from her.

The fourth approach, namely the production of various modifications of the already mastered word units is the one, the child resorts to foremost in acquiring the grammar. Innovations in phonemic shapes of words are positive markers to reveal that the child's grammar is generated, not imitated. From the finite elements and rules before him he creates for himself his own hypotheses on language system which differs from that of adults in its demands on regularity, productivity, symmetry and semantic transparency. Examples of regular formation and overextensions of regular rules can be found within any of the inflected category. At this point, let us stress at least that the child intentionally resorts to regular declénsion in substantives and adjectives, regular conjugation in verbs and regular comparison in adjectives and adverbs - while irregularities in any form are ignored. The unification of the productive endings, ignorance of the changes within the stem, lucid categorization as for gender, plural, noun and verb classes, non-differentiating between animate vs. inanimate, hard vs. soft paradigms and the preference of phonologically salient and productive endings as compared to the forms which are either homonymous or marked with zero are the most outstanding features of the child's early morphology and account for most

innovated forms which have no equivalents in the speech of adults.

The child´s belief in symmetry in language system is manifested in his hypothesis that each substantive has its corresponding adjective and verb that diminutivization is proper to all substantives, that all positives have their negative opposites, that all singulars have their plurals and that each verb has identical means of expressing perfective, imperfective and iterative aspects. His readiness to affix suffixes, infixes and prefixes, both real and imaginary to any word-basis or to delet them with the same ease to achieve the desired member of both legitimate and illegitimate contrastive pair reveal further important features of his language system, namely the vagueness of the frontiers by which the ascertained word classes are separated from one another, the wide combinability of word-bases with affixes and the loose connection of the derivative affixes with the word-bases. The child´s choice of certain word forms as bases for derivations then indicates that these are, because of their simplicity in form, transparency in meaning and high productivity most acceptable for him.

From many examples providing evidence in favour of the child´s linguistic behaviour, let us have here at least those most illustrative:

As for gender, prior to the stage when the child masters determinations of each noun by its morphological paradigm, he takes for granted that masculines end in consonant[x], feminines in -a and neuters in -o, ignoring thus a vast variety of less productive endings, some of them unique to a given gender, some, however, may be masculines or feminines, for example the ending -a in masculines such as "táta" or zero ending in feminines such as "sůl". The

---

[x] In view of the grammatical system of Standard Czech this is, however, the case of zero ending.

child´s orientation to the form of noun is for him the basis for both gender categorization and for the acquisition of grammatical concord. Examples such as "bílej sůl" or "hůl spadl" (where feminines with zero endings are treated as masculines), "táta šla" or "malá Míša" (where masculines with ending -a are treated as feminines, "vysypaná sůla" (where a-ending is affixed to feminines marked with zero ending) and "hodnej strejd" or "Míšák hapal" (where the ending -a is dropped, or, vice versa, the additional consonant is affixed in masculines with a-ending) presents evidence of this fact. As for the grammatical concord, the a-ending word form - both in adjectives and verbs - have at first remarkable predominance regardless the gender of the governing noun. Viewed from the point that the feminine is the strongest and most influential because of its outstandingly clear grammatical shape, its overgeneralization is natural.

Much interesting may be found in the analysis of the child´s plurals. Innovated forms here are the corollary of his hypotheses that:

- -i is a universal ending for marking the plural (hence the child´s forms "chlapi", "holky", "očičky" as against "chlapi", "holky", "očička" (where the difference in gender is ignored); "chlapci", "květináči" as against the adult "chlapci", "květináče" (where the difference in animacy is ignored); "tety", "košily" as against "tety", "košile" (where the difference in hard versus soft paradigm is ignored); "strejdi", "kuři" as against the adult "strejdové", "kuřata" (where the difference in hard vs. mixed declensions and exceptional endings are ignored);
- the ending alone is sufficient for marking the plural (hence the child´s forms "kluki", "hochy", "pány", "lefi", "pesi", "stůly" as against the adult "kluci", "hoši", "páni", "lvi", "psi", "sto-

ly", i.e. the alternations k/c, ch/š, n/ň, f/v, e/O, ů/o obligatory in Standard Czech remain unexpressed in the child;

- every singular has its plural (hence the child´s forming contrastive members such as "ovoce" - "*ovoci", "voda" - "*vody" etc. The context in which the illegitimate plurals appear conforms that the child indeed intends to express the difference in number, cf. the following phrases: "Jablíčko a hruška jsou dvě *ovoci" (= literally "the apple and the pear are two *fruits"); "Dvě *vody tečou, studená a horká" (i.e."two *waters run, cold and hot, i.e. from two water taps;
- every plural has its singular; to arrive at the desired form, the child simply drops the ending -i in nouns which he believes to be masculines ("punčocháči" - "*punčocháč") and affixes the singular ending -a in nouns which are, in his opinion, feminines ("spalničky" - "*spalnička"). The correct grammatical concord confirms the child´s intention to express the contrast singular versus plural, cf. phrases such as "tento *punčocháč je mokrej" (= this *tight is wet) - "tyto punčocháči jsou suchý" (= these tights are dry); "všechny děti mají spalničky" (= all children have measles), Jirka nemá *spalničku" (= Georgie has not a *measle).

As for the category of case, the nominative singular is one of the most frequent cases, both in children and in adults. As for the phonemic shape, however, only those forms which are regular and lucidly marked as for gender are in agreement with adult forms. This suggests that the child is more sensitive to regularity than to frequency of the heard models. Hence the explanation as to why the nominative singular, in spite of its high frequency, has so many innovated forms and also for the child´s preference for diminutives, i.e. the onomaziological

category which most closely corresponds to his hypotheses on word structure, i.e. the unification of the suffixes with -k- marker, maximum regularity and salience in categorization of gender, number and case, as well as neutrality as far as animacy and stem class are concerned.

As for the oblique cases, accusative singular belongs to early mastered phenomena. The starting point for the acquisition of its specific endings lays in those phrases which are common in adult-child communication, such as "umyjeme Honzíka", "papáme polívečku", "koupíme autíčko" etc. Innovations appear as soon as the child starts transferring the abstracted case marker to other words, belonging to different stem classes. Unlike the common norm, he extends the productive ending -u (i.e. the marker of the hard feminine paradigm) also to soft feminine paradigms and to paradigms with zero ending - hence the correct form "kostičku" but incorrect "kosťu", "košilu", "písňu". The same strategy is-mutatis mutandis - applied in all paradigms, masculine, feminine and neuters, singular and plural where also one, as a rule the most productive ending substitutes all others, including the zero ending. This behaviour goes well with the principle of productivity, contradicts, on the other hand, the other principle, namely that of semantic transparency where one of the most outstanding demand is not to mark two functions by means of an identical ending. The acceptance of homonymous forms, e.g. in nominative and accusative plural shows that in the interaction of the two principles, viz. the principle of productivity and that of semantic transparency , the former takes precedence.

From what has been said it follows that in an attempt to

account for the child´s acquisition of the word formation rules, one has to study not only the principles, outlined above, but also their mutual hierarchy. Many other examples supporting this fact may be found in our data which collect spontaneous utterances utterances in Czech speaking children. For general statement, of course, more studies on the process of acquiring strategies for constructing and interpreting words - within one language community and crosslinguistically - are needed in order to be able to determine which of the phenomena should be considered as idiosyncrasies of the specific child which as characteristics of the whole language or language families, and finally, which concern the language development in general.